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March 19, 2024

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Hon. Edgardo Ramos  
United States District Court for the  
Southern District of New York  
Thurgood Marshall United States Courthouse  
40 Foley Square  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Judge Ramos:

We, Hannah Jopling and Anastasia Velikovskaya, write in support of Irina Dilkinska, who has been a participant of The Focus Forward Project since January 23, 2024. The Focus Forward Project is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing an educational curriculum focused on reentry for individuals charged with federal crimes. Our classes are offered for people who are incarcerated and for those under pretrial supervision. The 13-week course is designed to provide both an intellectual and emotional outlet for participants as they navigate the stress and uncertainty of the pretrial phase of their federal cases. The class meets once a week for two hours, and participants complete weekly reading, journal, and other homework assignments. The first half of each class is spent discussing and connecting with themes in the memoir, *The Bite of the Mango* by Mariatu Kamara, who is a survivor of the Sierra Leone civil war, while the second half of each class focuses on life skills, highlighting a different skill each week. By the end of the course, participants will have gained a variety of transferable skills and tools, including, but not limited to: a completed resume, interview skills, conflict resolution skills, public speaking skills, and the setting of both short and long-term goals. The goal of The Focus Forward Project is to provide participants with the confidence and practical tools to successfully move forward with their lives.

Irina has been an outstanding participant of her Focus Forward group and serves as an inspiration to all of her classmates. Every week she is fully prepared, completes all the assignments, contributes thoughtful insights to the discussions, and reads uplifting statements from her journal. She also led an excellent book discussion and her speeches impressed her fellow participants with their eloquence. During the two weeks when everyone gave speeches, Irina always had something constructive and positive to say about each speech. Irina also offered valuable guidance on class topics such as effective conflict mediation and achieving goals. Her calm and gentle demeanor benefits the class, and she actively contributes to maintaining peace— both in the class and in the unit.

Irina is a thoughtful, kind, and resilient person who cares deeply about everyone around her, especially her family. She said that the birth of her children changed her life— “I was not belonging to myself anymore. My days and nights, my body and my soul all belong to my kids...they are the reason to wake up every morning, to keep searching for ways to make their life safer, better, and calmer.” The physical separation she experienced from her kids has been “painful” but made her stronger and more motivated to “move forward and be the best version” of herself. She speaks to her family as frequently as possible over the phone. Aside from her family, her faith also motivates her to be “a better person, not give up when life becomes hard, and to be grateful for every breath I take.” Irina has accepted her mistakes and the challenges that came her way, and learned to appreciate even the tough moments in life.

Throughout the course, we learned about Irina’s extensive education, legal work, and the numerous positions of responsibility that she held. Irina’s focus on self improvement and education impressed her classmates. For example, her long-term goals include completing a PhD. in Law before the age of 50 and being a successful businesswoman. She said her grandmother “was the one that lit the light of knowledge in me, by restlessly showing the beauty of our language that is embodied in great novels and poetry.” Irina’s professional achievements as a legal advisor and junior associate in Bulgaria, coupled with her intellectual curiosity about the world, is impressive. Irina takes every opportunity to learn and broaden her knowledge.

The other participants have benefitted from Irina’s example to move forward in a positive direction. Irina’s active participation, leadership, and willingness to help others have significantly enriched the Focus Forward group’s learning experience as well. Irina said that “being a good person, doing what you do in life with love, and having the love of your family” is what makes life meaningful and rich. The participants have described Irina as “articulate and poised” and “intelligent, caring, and hard working.” As facilitators, we too were delighted to have Irina in our class, and we are grateful for the opportunity to get to know such a strong, focused, and motivated individual.

Your Honor, our intent is to provide you with our experience with Irina Dilkinska. We appreciate the time Your Honor has taken to read our letter. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our supervisors at the Focus Forward Project by phone or email: (347) 619-2080 or info@focusforwardproject.org.

Sincerely,

*Hannah Jopling*

Hannah Jopling  
Focus Forward Project  
Class Facilitator

*Anastasia Velikovskaya*

Anastasia Velikovskaya  
Focus Forward Project  
Class Facilitator

cc: John Buza, Esq.